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Migrant and vagrant snipe on western Indian Ocean islands

by R. P. Prŷs-Jones & J. R. Wilson

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Taylor (1984) has recently reviewed records of the Pintail Snipe *Gallinago stenura* in Africa, and has suggested that the species may well be a fairly regular visitor to east Africa in small numbers between late September and late February. This paper provides information on a specimen from Aldabra Atoll (9°24′S, 46°20′E) which supports the concept of trans Indian Ocean movements by *G. stenura,* and reviews the occurrence of migrant and vagrant Gallinagininae on western Indian Ocean islands. The only member of the subfamily known to breed in the region, *Gallinago macrodactyla,* is restricted to Madagascar (Milon *et al.* 1973).

PINTAIL SNIPE *Gallinago stenura*

A single moribund snipe was found by J.R.W. on 20 November 1973 at the Settlement, West Island, Aldabra. The emaciated bird, which was being mobbed by Pied Crows *Corvus albus,* weighed only 56 g, and had a wing length (flattened chord) of 131 mm, tail 54 mm, bill (exposed culmen) 56 mm, tarsus 35 mm (British Museum (Nat. Hist.) specimen reg. no. 1980.26.1, *per* G. S. Cowles). This is the first record of any snipe from Aldabra and the first confirmed record of *G. stenura* from anywhere within the Seychelles *(sensu lato).* Elsewhere in the western Indian Ocean the species is known only from Socotra, where 2 specimens were taken in winter 1898/99 (Ogilvie-Grant & Forbes 1903), and from the Maldives, where it is a not uncommon visitor between late September and mid February (Phillips & Sims 1958, Phillips 1963, Strickland & Jenner 1978), but very probably occurs more widely (see below).

SWINHOE'S SNIPE *Gallinago megala*

The sole record from the western Indian Ocean of this eastern Palaearctic breeding species is a male collected in December 1958 on Addu Atoll, Maldives (Phillips 1963). The species is unknown from Africa, normally wintering from India eastwards.

GREAT SNIPE *Gallinago media*

Sight records of single birds were claimed for the central Seychelles in October 1959 (Crook 1960), October 1972 and January 1973 (Feare & High 1977), but in no case was any description provided. A wisp of 8 snipe, seen in early April 1971 on Diego Garcia, Chagos, were ''. . . almost certainly this species'' according to Hutson (1975: 8); however, the brief description he provides fits either *G. stenura* or *G. megala* considerably better than *G. media* (P. A. R. Hockey, P. B. Taylor). Also on Diego Garcia, Howells (1983) subsequently recorded that on 18 occasions in 1982/83, dates unspecified, he saw groups of up to 4 snipe which he thought were *G. media. G. media* breeds in the western and central Palaearctic, and winters widely through the Afrotropics (Cramp & Simmons 1983), including Zanzibar on irregular occasions (Pakenham 1979).

COMMON SNIPE *Gallinago gallinago*

Included under this heading are birds referred to as ''*G.* cf. *gallinago*'', ''*Gallinago* sp.'', or just ''snipe''. The first record for the western Indian Ocean region appears to be that of Ogilvie-Grant & Forbes (1903) who found *G. gallinago* to be fairly common on Socotra in winter 1898/99, and shot numbers for eating. Gadow & Gardiner (1903: 371) found *G. gallinago* to be ''extremely numerous'' at Addu Atoll, Maldives, in April 1900 and obtained one or more specimens; their suggestion of breeding was based solely on second hand information, however, and should be disregarded unless confirmed. Also at Addu, Phillips (1963) collected 4 individuals and observed several more between mid December 1958 and late January 1959, and Strickland & Jenner (1978) refer to observations of the species in October and November 1975, further commenting that ''snipe'' are regular winter visitors from September till April. For the Chagos, Gardiner & Cooper (1907: 48) refer to observations of a few ''snipe'' on Diego Garcia in July 1905; this probably implies *G. gallinago* since a subsequent mention of ''snipe'' by these authors in the same paper (p. 154) is known to do so (see Gadow & Gardiner 1907). The record is noteworthy in being the only indication of the occurrence of snipe in the western Indian Ocean region outside the period September – April inclusive.

For the Seychelles, Gadow & Gardiner (1907) observed a small wisp of snipe, probably *G. gallinago,* on St Joseph Atoll, Amirantes, in mid October 1905, a reference overlooked both by Stoddart & Coe (1979) and Feare & Watson (1984). Loustou-Lalanne (1963: 17) wrote of *G. gallinago* as ''Seen singly. Regular winter visitor.'' in the Seychelles *(sensu lato),* but Penny (1971: 556) doubted this on the grounds that *G. gallinago* ''. . . is an inland species in Africa, and most unlikely even as a vagrant to the Seychelles''. Subsequently, Feare & High (1977: 330) saw 2 or more snipe between late October 1972 and April 1973 in the central Seychelles which ''. . . were smaller than *G. media,* and were presumably referable to *G. gallinago* . . . or, less likely, *G. stenura*''. J.R.W. recorded *Gallinago* sp. on Mahé in November and December 1977 and on both Mahé and Praslin during the northern winter months of 1979, '80 and '81. They appeared to be regular in small numbers, normally occurring in the brackish back areas of *Avicennia* swamps and in rough grassland adjacent to the marshes. Occasionally they would venture out onto the coastal mud-flats close to the mouths of streams and, after

heavy rain, were regularly seen on the flooded golf-course at Anse-aux-Pins, Mahé. Further south, in the Mascarenes, the only published record of a snipe is a single *Gallinago* sp. seen on Réunion in December 1979 (Barré 1983).

G. gallinago breeds throughout much of the Palaearctic and winters in Africa, Europe and southern Asia. Birds reaching the western Indian Ocean would almost certainly have come from central or eastern breeding Palaearctic populations, since ringing has shown that European birds only rarely reach the Afrotropics (Dhont & Van Hecke 1977, Fog 1978, Cramp & Simmons 1983).

JACK SNIPE *Limnocryptes minimus*

Feare & High (1977: 330) ascribe a "very small snipe" seen in early September 1973 on Bird Island, central Seychelles, to this species, but provide no further description. This is the sole western Indian Ocean record of a species which breeds in the north Palaearctic and winters widely through the Afrotropics north of the equator, the Middle East and India (Cramp & Simmons 1983).

Discussion

Excepting only *G. gallinago* and *G. megala* from the Maldives and *G. stenura* from the Maldives and Aldabra, all the above records from oceanic islands are based solely on field obervation. Nevertheless, despite the great difficulties that field identification of snipe pose, only Hutson (1975) supports his observation with a description, and his identification appears to be incorrect. We would suggest that all observations to date from Indian Ocean islands be accepted as demonstrating merely the occurrence of snipe, but not as defining the species involved. In particular, any assumption that an observation is *a priori* more likely to refer to *G. gallinago* than to *G. stenura* would appear untenable, since the records from the Maldives and Aldabra support Taylor's (1984) suggestion of trans Indian Ocean movements by *G. stenura.* J.R.W., who paid particular attention to the snipe he saw in the Seychelles, now considers that many of his records may well refer to *G. stenura* rather than *G. gallinago* (based on shorter bill length, lack of white on tail, relatively heavier barring on flanks, more subdued, lower call and flight pattern).

In conclusion, we would concur strongly with the comments of Feare & Watson (1984: 571) regarding both the need for more observations on migrants in the western Indian Ocean and the need for a publicized central register to which tourists and others can contribute their findings. In addition, we recommend that sight records submitted anywhere for publication should include full descriptions for species that are difficult to identify or locally rare.

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Further parallels between the Asian Bay Owl *Phodilus badius* and *Tyto* species

by D. R. Wells

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Stresemann & Stresemann (1966) have investigated moult pattern, Ford (1967) a range of mainly osteological evidence, Feduccia & Ferree (1978) the form of the bony stapes and de Boer (1984) karyotypes in the Asian Bay Owl *Phodilus badius* and all agree it is a tytonid, close to the 'monkey-faced' owls *Tyto.* Much of the structural evidence that has been produced in support of a formerly widely held, alternative view, that it is a strigid, is compromised by variation to be found between and even within accepted strigid genera, and is better interpreted as convergence. Thus the broad, steep-faced (versus narrow,